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ABSTRACT

Based on observations of three first grade classrooms in Milan, Italy, this paper provides information about beginning writing instruction in Italy and offers suggestions for adapting some of the more successful techniques found there into writing programs in the United States. The various sections of the paper contain the following: (1) background information on the classrooms observed and the techniques used to gather data, (2) a discussion of the beginning writing process as it is taught in Italian schools, (3) developmental changes in teaching techniques that occur during the school year, (4) a description of writing and language lessons that are built on play, (5) a review of the writing curriculum in the schools, (6) a list of perceptions about the teaching of writing in the elementary school, and (7) a discussion of the reasons for the success of the Italian form of beginning writing instruction, along with suggestions for incorporating several of its features into American classrooms. (FL)

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BEGINNING WRITING IN ITALY

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Beginning Writing in Italy

Through cross-cultural studies we can better understand the fundamental psycholinguistic processes of . . . writing and the way in which these processes develop. (Downing, p. 8) This manuscript will describe the teaching of beginning writing in Italy. Pedagogists in Italy do not believe they have a writing problem in the elementary school and report that by January of grade one most children write independently. I was fortunate to be able to observe the teaching of beginning writing and can report firsthand children in Italy are highly successful in developing beginning writing skills. Literacy instruction, however, is to a great extent culture specific (Cogan, p. 463) and will vary considerably depending upon educational goals of a given country. With this in mind we can cautiously adapt from successful programs to improve our own writing program.

Background Information

During Fall Semester 1983 I traveled to Milan, Italy while on faculty improvement leave to observe the teaching of beginning writing. With the cooperation of Italian school officials three representative first grade classrooms were identified for observation. These three classrooms were scheduled for daily visitation from October 11, 1983 through December 14, 1983. Since school is in session six days per week, observations were made in each of the three classrooms twice per week. Observations began at 9:00 daily and ended at 10:30. This one and one-half hour time block is considered fundamental to the development of literacy by Italian educators.

The major curriculum aim in grades one and two is the development of the child's social personality. (UNESCO, p. 613) Since 1955 an activity oriented curriculum has replaced the classical separate subject curriculum. The daily schedules of the three classes observed followed this pattern.

8:30	9:00	Opening exercises - planning for day
9:00	10:30	Language Arts activities including moral development and physical education.
10:30	11:00	Recess including restroom break followed by independent and/or small group activities primarily student directed.
11:00	12:00	Exploration of the environment and the study of nature including mathematics.
12:15	12:30	Summary of day and dismissal

During the recess period from 10:30 to 11:00 while children were engaged in independent activities conferences were held with teachers. At first questions focused on organizational-methodological concerns but later questions about individual student progress were possible.

In addition to regular conferences with teachers, I had several conferences with the director of schools to report progress, make specific requests and inquire about classroom practice in Milan as compared with Italy as a whole. In Italy, goals of schools are set by the national government, curriculum is determined at the regional level and methodology is an individual teacher prerogative. Vincent Morea, Director of Schools, in Milan stated, "You will find similar teaching methodologies in all northern provinces of Italy and in many instances these teaching practices have been adopted by teachers in rural sections of the south. This is true because teachers subscribe to the same professional journals which provide

theoretical formulations as well as teaching suggestions. In grade one writing instruction comes first and reading instruction is an outgrowth of writing instruction." Once this sequence was understood it was easy to focus observation. For about ten days I was an observer only. After that I became a participant observer as teachers referred children to me to examine writing samples. It was easy to note progress for children write in a copybook called a "quaderno" thus compiling a permanent record of progress for review and comparison.

The Beginning Writing Process

A writing lesson always begins with a language experience either an actual experience or a vicarious experience. The class could go on a nature walk near the school to observe trees, plants, etc. The children could visit a market, conduct a science experiment on the weather, mix dough for bread, in short engage in any activity to share a common experience. For a vicarious experience the children could see a film, filmstrip or study a set of pictures around a central theme. Most often, however, the teacher tells a story drawn from the rich traditional literature of the country or from the equally rich though less extensive regional literature of the area. Teachers know these stories very well and seldom refer to printed sources for help. Children respond very positively to these stories and seem to sense that this is an important way the culture is communicated.

Most lessons observed by this writer began with a story told by the teacher. The story was followed by a discussion reiterating important points, clarifying transitions and asking key questions to assure the children understand the experience. Next, the teacher

focused on a key sentence which summarized the experience or provided insight into an important part of the experience. In the beginning of the year the teacher assumes a direct role in arriving at the key sentence. Later as children understand the instructional process the teacher guides the children so they provide the key sentence. The teacher writes the sentence on the chalkboard and this becomes the focus for the writing lesson for the day.

The class is instructed to copy the sentence in the quaderno (copybook). Early in the year the teacher demonstrates the handwriting procedure explaining the strokes necessary for the formation of the letters. The teacher circulates around the room helping children with letter formation. Children are encouraged to leave their seats when necessary to go to the chalkboard to study the letters or utilize any of the aids available in the room for handwriting practice. Letter charts appear in every classroom mounted on the wall and word charts constructed by the teacher from previous lessons are available to the children. Teachers plan these charts to include beginning vocabulary words and letters. These copying activities always include the sentence written both in cursive and manuscript. The two forms are taught simultaneously from the beginning of first grade.

After the children have copied the sentence they draw a picture illustrating the sentence/story. There is always adequate time for both the copying of the sentence and the drawing of the picture. The teacher plays an active role in both processes circulating around the room helping when necessary. It is interesting to note the picture is always an outgrowth of the writing and not the other way around as

often practiced in our American first grade classrooms. According to Graves and others children may feel no need to put in writing aspects of a topic already represented in drawing. (Dyson, p. 886) In Italy the focus is always on the sentence expressed for this thought unit represents a summary or important statement of the group language experience.

A summary of the writing activity to this point is helpful for clarification.

Writing Lessons

begin with	Language experience
proceed to	A key sentence
followed by	Copying
followed by	A drawing

Developmental Changes

Near the middle of October teachers begin a transition process from copying to dictation. The teachers informed me in advance of this transition and helped to prepare me for this important instructional change. To simplify this explanation I will state the case of Delores, one of the three teachers observed. After telling a story - a well-known folktale - she lead a discussion of the story and settled on a summary sentence which was really a combination of the ideas offered by the children. Delores paused at this point of the lesson and explained to the children class writing had progressed so well

that now it was time to write in the quaderno without a sentence on the chalkboard.

Delores continued by encouraging the children to put best effort into the writing. Orally she stated the sentence and instructed the children to write the sentence and follow the writing with a picture. Delores explained she would not circulate around the room but instead sit at a desk facing the children. "If any of you have difficulty come to me for help." As the lesson progressed five of the children needed to exercise this option. She helped each of them with individual problems and reassured each with a winning smile. Later she talked with me about the importance of child success in this transition. Emphasis on this especially supportive helpful posture continued for several more class days until the teacher believed the transition was complete. Children had settled into a new routine without any noticeable problem.

On December 6 Delores made the transition from dictation to free writing. By this time the children had practiced all of the letters in the alphabet and were familiar with many key vocabulary words. She introduced this lesson following the familiar format telling the children another folktale. This time she explained the children should decide on a representative sentence. She spent an additional five minutes explaining they were now ready for free writing and that she would help them make this change. This time she circulated around the room helping children construct individual sentences. Several had difficulty with this transition and extra time was spent assisting them. Later she explained to me that all would make this transition but some would need more time. By the end of January she suggested

all will be writing freely. "Only Samantha, I believe, will have difficulty with this transition for she is dysgraphic." It is interesting that special concern focuses in Italy on what they refer to as the dysgraphic (writing problem) child while in America we are more likely to hear the word dyslexic (reading problem). Of course many teachers in the United States would ignore both of these terms and focus on corrective action based on symptoms. It was my regret that I could not stay in Italy until the end of January to observe the complete transition to free writing where children easily write a page or two in the copybook.

The development of writing follows this sequence.

Copying	Dictation	Free Writing

Play and Writing

Language lessons do not conclude with an illustration or picture drawn by the child. An integral part of any lesson is play called gioco where children develop new vocabulary. Gioco, sometimes spelled giuoco, represents play to an educational end and is firmly ingrained in the Italian culture and educational process. Children's play is regarded as fundamental to the formation of intellectual, moral, social and emotional development. (Ciari, p. 23) It is believed that through play an harmonious and cooperative atmosphere is created for educational activities. The classroom represents the family unit during the school hours where teamwork and co-action on the part of classmates insure that all children contribute and are successful. Through play children practice classroom learning in a warm, comfortable and cooperative state. Children clearly enjoyed these play

activities often encouraging the teacher to continue even when time was running out.

The play focused on word production or vocabulary development. In the Italian language as in all alphabetic languages syllables can provide a format for teaching and practice of word patterns. Here is an example of the way one class giocoed to an educational end while producing a group chart called a scheda. The teacher wrote three familiar words on the chalkboard pointing out the last syllable of the word above represented the first syllable of the next word.

se ra (night)

ra na (frog)

na ve (ship)

Earlier in the school year other play experiences had demonstrated the difference between vowel, consonant and syllable so during this lesson only a brief review was necessary. Then the teacher asked the children to offer a two syllable word beginning with ve. In a spirit of lightness or play with a great deal of interaction among class members and between teacher and students the group proceeded to complete this word ladder.

ve la (sail)

la ma (llama)

ma re (sea)

re mo (oar)

mo to (motion)

to ro (bull)

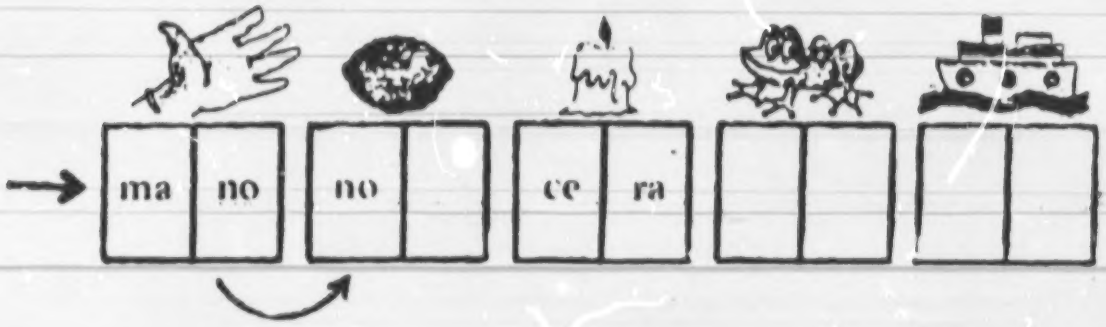
ro sa (rose)

Throughout the entire play experience children were free to talk with each other, move around the room or consult directly with the teacher. Freedom of expression was encouraged and student motivation was obvious with student response noteworthy. On the few occasions where the noise level was too high this was mentioned to the class and the noise level was quickly reduced. In other instances where one or two children were too noisy the teacher indicated "you are disturbing." This was enough to bring about the necessary change on the part of the children involved. Teachers seem to distinguish between noisy noise and busy noise and act accordingly. While children have much freedom in class it does not seem to move to license so that learning is in jeopardy.

Another way children gioco to an educational end is through scheda personale or personal cards which resemble in appearance our worksheets. In Italy teachers are more inclined to use group charts for two reasons. Paper is very expensive nevertheless available. And, teachers believe the group activity is more valuable than individual effort. "We are learning together."

Ideas for the scheda are available in professional journals published for teachers. Teachers subscribe to these journals to keep abreast of changes taking place in education and to have a ready supply of practical ideas for instruction. Kits, boxed materials and activity books are available in Italy but not used as extensively as in the United States for cost is often borne by the teacher. Part of a commercially prepared scheda is reproduced below. Notice this is called play not practice as so often found in the United States.

Il gioco del domino. (playing dominoes)



With the last part of every word begin the next.
Write each part of the words on the card.
Then, re-copy underneath

Con la parte finale di ogni parola incomincia quella seguente.
Scrivi i pezzi di parola nelle tesserine.
Poi ricopia qui sotto.

The Writing Curriculum

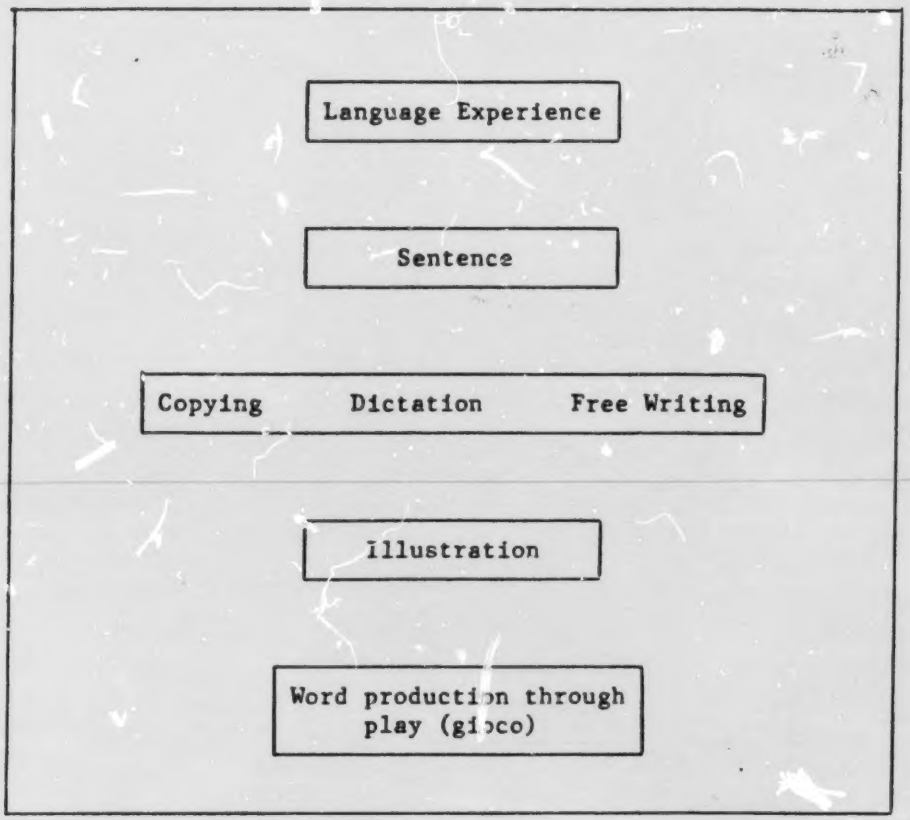
Direct observations in first grade classrooms revealed the development of copying, dictation and free writing. In order to understand the entire writing program of the elementary school a request was made to observe in grades two through five the balance of what is called the "primary" school. Two days were spent observing in grades 2-5 followed by consultation with the teachers. Fortunately for this observer the third grade teacher and the fifth grade teacher spoke excellent English. This was helpful for while my skill in Italian was developing rapidly I needed help with more sophisticated concepts. Both these teachers were willing and able to explain the development of the writing curriculum since both teachers had taught all grades in the elementary school. This is true of all experienced teachers for teachers stay with the same group of pupils for the

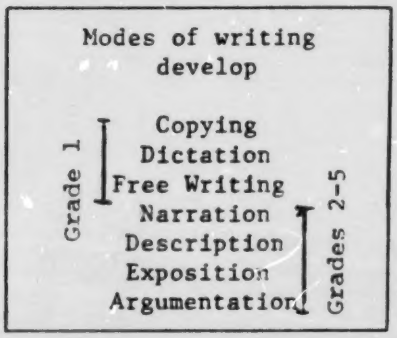
entire elementary experience. They explained the writing program in this way.

In first grade writing develops from copying to dictation to free writing as explained above. By the end of the first grade children are involved in two modes of writing - narration and description. Through grades 2-5 narration and description are developed through numerous writing lessons. Before completing the elementary school children have utilized both exposition and argumentation. There is no plan to teach these modes of writing but they emerge in response to children's needs. As one teacher put it, "Sometimes it is necessary to provide information through writing and sometimes it is necessary to convince through writing." Direct instruction in exposition and argumentation is delayed until the middle school grades 6-7-8 and continues throughout high school. According to Kantor and Perron similarities to this pattern are commonly found in the United States. They state, "embryonic forms of exposition and argumentation can be found in writings of elementary school children" in the United States. (Kantor and Perron, p. 748)

In the Italian curriculum writing and reading instruction are never separated. The two are bound together as parts of the language process. (Tutolo, p. 1) While the two processes go on simultaneously emphasis at the beginning of grade one is on writing and reading is incidental. It is not until the second semester of grade one that formal reading instruction begins. The language lesson during first semester of grade one is a writing lesson. With this in mind let us examine a more complete model for beginning writing.

Beginning Writing





During the semester in Milan I had occasion to talk with many teachers, administrators and college professors at conferences and seminars as well as informal meetings. As a result of these

discussions I would like to share some more global perceptions about the teaching of writing in the elementary school.

1. The roots of literacy are found in imagery as expressed through drawing practiced extensively in the nursery school. In grade one symbolization through writing develops. Reading is delayed until a base of writing is established. (endnote 1)
2. The physical act of beginning writing is slow and often laborious for the child therefore adequate time for reflection, direction and redirection must be provided in a writing lesson. (endnote 2)
3. Play is essential to the intellectual, moral, social and emotional development of the child and thus should be maintained as an integral part of the classroom experience.
4. The classroom is a family unit, therefore cooperation is stressed and competition is minimized.
5. A success oriented curriculum for beginning writing is more realistic than a challenge-oriented curriculum.
6. Teaching applies what we know about child development - the developmentalism of Piaget is pervasive today. (endnote 3)
7. Teachers plan language activities based on interests and needs of the children.
8. Evaluation of writing growth remains a matter of professional judgment based on teacher observation rather than dependence upon testing.

9. It takes time for children to learn and for teachers to learn to know a child. A teacher should remain with a group of children for the entire elementary experience, grades 1-5.

Reports of literacy instruction in other countries are too often ethnocentric. When reported from our own cultural perspective, these observations can be difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, I would like to summarize reasons why I believe beginning writing instruction is so successful in Italy and offer suggestions for curriculum modification in our own country. (1) In Italy writing is an important component of the language arts and needed time is allotted for thought, reflection and composition. We could improve the teaching of writing in the United States by endorsing a comparable time commitment. (2) The classroom activity curriculum promotes writing through teacher pupil planning and group interaction in a cooperative noncompetitive setting. We could endorse this curriculum approach in the United States if we responded to the research of early childhood educators and others who have long advocated such an approach. Lastly, there is an expectation that children will learn to write successfully in Italy and this expectation seems to contribute to the desired effects. We have understood the Hawthorne effect and the Pygmalian effect in the United States and this research could be utilized to contribute to needed change in our writing program.

Endnotes

(1) This curriculum provision can be traced back to the end of World War II when Carleton Washburne acting for the allied military government was assigned the task of reconstructing public schooling in Italy. Washburne believed reading should be delayed until the child reached a mental age of 6.6 According to Wolf and many American historians of education no other American is more closely linked to Italian education. Charles R. Wolfe, Loyola University of Chicago, unpublished manuscript, "John Dewey in the evolution of Italian Education," 1983, p. 10.

(2) Myra Barrs in "The New Orthodoxy About Writing: Confusing Process and Pedagogy," Language Arts 60, No. 7, October, 1983, p. 832 makes this point. "It seems clear that young writers often write to a very short length partly because the act of writing is so difficult and demanding for them."

(3) Piaget is the most current of a long line of philosophers, psychologists and educators who influenced the teaching of beginning writing in Italy. Most influential of these include Commenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey.

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